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ABSTRACT

Dividing elementary classrooms into three reading groups has become a U.S. educational tradition. Reading groups seem to have been an experiment in meeting the needs of students of different abilities, but the original caveats about flexible groups seem to have been forgotten. With the popularization of leveled basal readers, where changing groups means skipping or repeating a book, static reading groups have become the norm. Most children are placed in these groups during their primary years, usually in the first few weeks of first grade. Regardless of individual differences in growth, these students often remain in the same group for their elementary years. Educators need to think about ways to reverse the negative trends caused by ability grouping. For those educators who prefer to hold to the tradition of grouping yet want to make some positive changes, the following suggestions should be considered: (1) develop multiple criteria placement procedures; (2) reassess group placement throughout the year; (3) allow group changes during the year; (4) try to help poor readers move to at-level groups; (5) increase the amount of materials poor readers read; (6) reassess student placement at the end of each school year; and (7) change perceptions about the numbers of students in each group. (Eighty-two references and a literacy research and reports order form are attached.) (RS)

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Queen Bee District #16
Glendale Heights, Illinois

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Literacy Research and Reports

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THREE READING GROUPS:
AN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL TRADITION

Dividing elementary classrooms into three reading groups has become an American educational tradition. Despite decades of research questioning its effectiveness, this tradition has become entrenched in our educational system. Two questions come to mind when educational practices have become a tradition: What historical factors have led up to this practice? and Should the value of this tradition continue to be questioned by educators and researchers? The first question will be addressed in this paper by a review of the historical factors which led up to reading group formation. The second question will be addressed by an examination of the research on four aspects of ability grouping: 1) group placement decisions, 2) student mobility, 3) differentiated instruction between groups, and 4) the effects of grouping for reading.

Historical Perspective

Instruction in America's earliest schools was individualized, but as the population of the country grew, schools changed to accommodate this growth. One of the first changes in instructional practices in the early 1800's was an adaptation of the monitorial system. Taken from the work of Lancaster and Bell in England, this system was, in effect, an experiment in grouping. Teachers taught the day's lesson to students, or monitors, who, in turn, taught the lesson to groups of children. The groups were not classed by any criteria nor was there differentiation among the groups. The benefit of this system is apparent: one teacher could teach a large number of students, as great as 284 in one instance (Keliher, 1931).

With the influx of different immigrant groups, the population became more heterogeneous, and the effectiveness of the monitorial system began to decrease. Furthermore, educators began to teach from a curriculum organized by subjects, which resulted in an awareness of individual differences (Keliher, 1931). Since the rate at which students learned differed, teachers began to become concerned about the individual student's rate of learning. To meet the changing needs of the diverse population and the challenge of teaching all students the same body of knowledge, educators began experimenting with alternative grouping plans.

Beginning of Grouping for Instruction

The first formal grouping plan in American schools was Harris's flexible promotion scheme begun in 1868. With this plan, students were divided into groups and were taught the curriculum by stages. Students who had mastered the material presented in their group at the end of ten weeks were promoted to the next group (Goldberg, Passow, & Justman, 1966).

The flexible promotion scheme never enjoyed widespread popularity, but it did inspire other types of grouping systems. In 1886, for example, the Elizabeth Plan, was instituted in New Jersey. In the Elizabeth Plan, each grade was divided into three or four groups. As soon as the pupils showed they were ready, they advanced to the next group. A variation of the Elizabeth Plan, the Cambridge Plan, began in 1891. Students were assigned to a fast or slow track and were promoted as they finished the material in one grade. With this plan students could finish eight years of school in six years (Keliher, 1931).

One of the most innovative plans for grouping in the nineteenth century was the Double Tillage Plan begun in 1894. Teachers using this plan taught their curriculum during the first half of the year and repeated it during the second. The bright students could advance to the next grade at the end of the semester and learn the material in that class as the teacher was repeating it for the slower students.

Other innovative plans of the 1890's were the Santa Barbara A-B-C Plan and the Chicago X-Y-Z Plan. With these grouping plans, students were divided in each grade by ability and were promoted through the groups and then through the grades. With the Santa Barbara Plan, for example, a student completing the curriculum of the A group in one grade would be promoted to the C level of the next grade (Keliher, 1931).

Influence of Graded Curricula

As educators were struggling to teach students with more diverse backgrounds and differing abilities, the school system made some radical changes which influenced grouping practices. Schools had begun to be divided into classes and grades in the middle of the nineteenth century, but it was not until the last half of the 1800's that schools began using graded curricula. Morgenstern (1966) notes that with the advent of the graded curricula, the textbooks became the primary source of instruction. This, in turn,

affected the role of the teacher. "Because of the rigid uniformity of instruction at each level, teachers needed a minimum of preparation" (Morgenstern, 1966, p. 6). During this time in American schools, all that a teacher needed to know to be able to teach the current class of students was how far the class had advanced the year before.

The curriculum that teachers followed was aimed at bright students. Because many students were not able to keep up with the expectations of the school system, they were labeled "retarded learners." Up to one third of all students at that time were so labeled (Morgenstern, 1966).

Advent of Ability Grouping

The large number of students who could not keep up with the curriculum was a concern for educators, so by the 1920's, a new grouping concept was introduced. Up to this time, the goal of grouping was to help students graduate in a shorter amount of time, but with the inclusion of graded curricula and textbooks, the structure of education became more stratified. Now the concern was to prevent slower students from failing.

The shift from an emphasis on accelerating the progress of the bright students to an emphasis on helping the slower students resulted in a new idea of grouping. Adapting the curriculum to the abilities of the students by ability grouping seemed to be the answer to the problem.

Ryan and Crecelius (1927) suggest that ability grouping began as a refinement of graded schools. They wrote that ability grouping seemed to be the most logical next step toward trying to address the needs of the students. If students were taught in homogeneous groups, they reasoned, all could excel at some time.

Influence of the Testing Movement

The advent of ability grouping was hastened by breakthroughs in intelligence and achievement testing. About the same time educators began looking for methods to group students, Terman revised the Stanford-Binet intelligence test.

The Stanford-Binet was an accepted measure of intelligence in the early 1920's, and some educators considered intelligence testing a foolproof method of assessing student abilities. Thorndike

reported that testing results were often uncritically accepted and were the basis for many unjustifiable decisions (Morgenstern, 1966).

The unquestioning attitude toward the use of tests at this time was a result of the extreme confidence Americans had toward science (Shannon, 1989). Science promised a rational explanation of any event through the discovery of its relationship to the laws of nature. Furthermore, psychologists were proposing the belief that learning could be measured by behavior. This belief was quickly integrated into the field of education. For example, the reports from the National Society for the Study of Education from 1915-1919 show the influence of science, psychology, and the new interest in business: they recommended that educators 1) analyze the learning environment, 2) measure the effects of various methods with tests, and 3) adopt measures that yield the highest results.

As intelligence and achievement tests became more popular, the grouping movement grew. Using test scores for grouping students seemed "perfectly reasonable" to most educators (Burr, 1931). In 1919, Frances Garver used test scores to show that students in grades 6 through 8 could have a mental ability range from grades 3 through 12 with a similar range in math and reading scores. To better instruct these students, Garver recommended grouping the students by their intelligence scores (Burr, 1931).

Many other educators came to the same conclusion as Garver and used intelligence scores to group their students. By 1927, the United States Bureau of Education reported that homogeneous grouping by intelligence scores was used in 247 out of 292 cities (Burr, 1931). Ability grouping, therefore, was brought into schools practically overnight as a result of the testing movement (Keliher, 1931).

Ability Group Placement Using Intelligence Scores

The first organized plan that grouped students according to their intelligence scores was the Detroit XYZ Plan. Percentages of students were assigned to groups: 20% in the low group, 60% in the middle group, and 20% in the high group (Keliher, 1931). As grouping became more accepted, more complicated methods of group placement were devised. Ryan and Crecelius (1927) reported that the following criteria were all considered together for one school system to form ability groups: chronological

age, mental age, IQ, height, weight, pedagogical age (achievement scores), anatomical age (dental records or number of permanent teeth), social age, and class rank.

In the mid 1920's many schools used ability grouping. There was a decrease in the number of schools using grouping in the 1930's, but with the popularization of the basal reader in the 1940's, there was a concentrated effort to encourage teachers to use ability groups for reading (Alexander, 1983). By 1948 approximately 53% of all schools used ability grouping (Morgenstern, 1966), and by the end of the 1960's almost every school system had adopted the idea of the basal reading program with ability grouping (Alexander, 1983).

Individualized Instruction

The purpose of ability grouping was to meet the needs of the individual student. While many schools experimented with different kinds of grouping in the early twentieth century, some attempted to individualize instruction. In the 1920's, Carleton Washburne instituted individualized instruction in Winnetka, Illinois. In this program, each child was given a course of study to accomplish and was tested and promoted as soon as the work for any grade was completed (Cremin, 1961).

Although Winnetka continued to use an individualized program for 20 years, very few other schools followed suit until the mid-1950's. Smith (1986) reports that educators in reading began to become interested in individualized instruction in the 1950's and through the 1960's.

Gibbons (1971) describes individual instruction of the 1960's as a reaction against the lock-step system where all students had to learn the same material in the same amount of time. To accomplish this goal, teachers used a variety of approaches: tutoring, correspondence courses, self-paced units, programmed instruction, and individual study.

Individualized instruction is most commonly remembered as programmed learning. Programmed learning was an educational outgrowth of behavioral psychology. The subject matter was broken down into discrete skills which students had to learn. As they worked through skills, students were given immediate feedback on their performance.

Some educators in the 1960's thought that individualized instruction would sweep the country. Louis Bright, the Associate Commissioner for Research in the United States Office of Education, predicted that by the mid 1970's most schools in the United States would teach the major portion of their academic subjects by individualized instruction (Esbensen, 1968). Bright's prediction did not come true. One reason individualized instruction fizzled out in reading may have been because of the basal publishers' response to programmed learning. Many basal texts in the 1970's began to incorporate management systems in their teaching materials that emphasized a series of skills to be learned. Since teachers were accustomed to using basal materials, the emphasis on the mastery of skills may have been enough of a compromise for those teachers interested in individualizing instruction. According to Shannon (1989), the use of basal readers did not decrease during the height of the individualized instruction movement. In 1964, approximately 90% of the schools in America relied on basal materials. That number increased to 94% by 1977. Today the major part of reading instruction in the elementary schools is carried on by ability groups using basal readers (Harris & Sipay, 1980).

Ability Grouping for Reading

As ability groups and basal readers became popular, teachers automatically began to divide their classes into three reading groups. Basal readers were well suited to three reading groups. Most of the basal readers used in the 1970's were organized by levels. Each grade would have a number of levels assigned to it. The leveled approach was used in graded schools using ability grouping to give the students a chance to advance through the readers at their own rate. In theory, this practice seems to meet the needs of individual learners; however, the research on group placement decisions, student mobility, differentiated instruction, and the effects of grouping may highlight the disadvantages of using ability groups for reading.

Reading Group Placement

Assigning students to reading groups in first grade may seem inconsequential to many teachers, but it is, in fact, quite important. Haller and Davis (1981, p. 163) go so far as to say that "decisions made by elementary school teachers may have an important influence on students' life chances." It has even

been suggested that the possibility of entering college preparatory programs can be traced to initial ability grouping. Gamoran (1986) postulated that the symbolic significance of reading groups may affect student learning as early as first grade. If these ideas are even partially true, the importance of reading group placement is evident. And if placement decisions are important, educators should be aware of the basis for placement decisions.

Early Placement

In a study of 23 first-grade students, Eder (1981) found that the students had been placed in groups after three weeks of school. The basis for the placement decisions, according to the teacher, were the recommendation of the kindergarten teachers and the first grade teacher's own observations in the first weeks of school. Weinstein (1976), who also studied first-grade reading group placement, examined the placement procedure of three first grade classes and found that the groups were formed during the first month of school. Gamoran's study (1986) of twelve first-grade classrooms found that teachers divided students into reading groups early in the year using the teachers' perception of student ability as the main criterion. Although these three studies report the practices of only sixteen classrooms, Eder's (1981) generalization that most students are assigned to ability groups within the first few weeks of first grade deserves consideration. The importance of these initial placements will be discussed later.

Students may be assigned to groups early in their schooling, yet teachers of all grades make placement decisions. In their review of four studies, Borko, Shavelson, and Stern (1981) found that teachers use pieces of relevant information about students to form an estimate of student ability. One of the pieces of information they use is reading achievement, but others may not have a direct relationship to reading.

Influence of Socio-economic Status

Finding that a proportionately large number of minority and socio-economically disadvantaged children were placed into lowest reading groups, Haller and Davis (1980, 1981) surveyed 37 teachers of fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade students in New York to determine the relationship between low SES and reading group placement. They asked teachers to sort their students into three reading groups and to

record their reasons for the placements. After careful coding of these comments, the researchers found that teachers placed students in groups more often on the basis of general ability, reading ability, and work habits, than they did on social relations and family background, but the last two were also factors in the placement. Haller and Waterman (1985) found similar results in another study. Students were placed by reading ability first, then behavior, academic competence, work habits, and home background. Borko and Niles (1982), who used hypothetical students for a study to determine placement decisions, found that the decision strategies most used for placement were test scores, oral reading, and class participation.

These studies seem to indicate that although a child's SES is one of the factors of reading group placement, it is not one of the primary factors. A questionnaire given to 104 teachers by Shake (1986), however, may lend a different perspective to these results. In the other research studies, teachers were asked to place either hypothetical or real children into groups. Shake asked teachers how they usually determine placement. She found that teachers most often used the previous teacher's recommendation as the basis for group formation. The recommendations of the previous teacher usually translate into the group placement of the student during the current year. Shake's findings support Sorensen's (1970) research on assignment criterion and Gamoran's (1986) findings that a student's group placement for one year may be a signal to teachers and administrators when they decide on the student's placement for the following year. This finding is an important one in the study of group placement. If teachers primarily rely on previous placement of students, group stratification is perpetuated, and possibly the decision of the kindergarten or first grade teacher is the determining factor in group placement.

Group Flexibility

When ability grouping was begun in the 1920's, teachers were encouraged to keep their groups flexible. Both Gray and Betts recommended that groups remain tentative and flexible (Smith, 1986), and as early as 1931, Keliher warned teachers that individuals are not necessarily consistent in their ability or in rate of growth, so should not be placed in inflexible groups.

Despite these early warnings, research indicates that once groups are formed, they remain relatively permanent (Barr, 1974; Hiebert, 1983). Several studies using large samples support this

statement. Groff (1962) surveyed 66 teachers of over 2000 students in second, third, and fourth grades and found that the size of the groups changed very little during the year and that approximately 16% of the students changed reading groups during a given year. Hawkins (1966, 1967) examined the grouping practices of 34 teachers of 940 students in five states. He found the mobility rate to be less than Groff, about 9%. Weinstein's first grade study (1976) indicated that reading groups were stable after the first month of school. Hallinan and Sorensen (1983) surveyed 28 classroom teachers in grades four through seven and found little movement across groups. Wiesendanger and Berlem (1981) surveyed 225 teachers in 100 schools in New York and reported that 90% of the teachers did not change a student's reading group in five months. There are several questions that need to be asked before these research studies can be evaluated. For example, the Groff and Hawkins studies are commonly used as examples of the inflexibility of reading groups. No standards or guidelines about an appropriate number of changes, however, have been recommended.

In two teacher textbooks used in teacher training, the issue of group flexibility seems to be de-emphasized. When discussing ability grouping, Alexander (1983) lists the benefits and detriments of ability grouping. Among the detriments of grouping, he writes that groups are often static, but he does not warn against inflexible groups. Harris and Sipay (1980) recommend that groups should be flexible, but they also comment that too much change can be as undesirable as too little. They give no reason for this advice, however, nor do they recommend the amount of change that should occur before it is "too much." They only say that changes should be made when it becomes obvious that the reading needs of a student can be better met in a new group.

Although the advice of Harris and Sipay about group change seems reasonable, other factors enter into a teacher's decision. In reassessing the placement of 165 fifth graders, Davis (1989) found that teachers recommended a change of reading placement be considered for 42% of the students. If given the opportunity to make changes in reading groups, teachers may very well consider revised placement of many of their students. Why they do not make these changes on their own may be partially explained by a theory proposed by Hallinan and Sorensen.

Vacancy Competition

Hallinan and Sorensen (1983) posited the idea that allocation of students into instructional groups may be part of a vacancy competition process. Vacancy competition assumes that filled positions are closed to those outside the group. Only as positions become vacant, can another student "apply" for that position. In school settings, teachers assign students to instructional groups as places in the group become vacant. When this occurs, teachers find students with the closest match to the other members of the group, but until a place becomes vacant, changes will probably not happen.

The research of Hallinan and Sorensen (1983) has supported the theory of vacancy competition. In their study of 48 classes in northern California, they found the following results: 1) the number and size of groups is uniform across different classes regardless of the student body composition, 2) students with a given ability may be assigned to different levels of groups in classes with different ability distributions, 3) the number of groups is not related to the size of the class, and 4) teachers favor three ability groups.

Vacancy competition can in part explain why groups tend to remain stable, but there are other deterrents to group mobility that Hallinan and Sorensen (1983) have identified. They found that when one student is moved from a group, a reciprocal move is needed to equalize the groups. In other words, teachers tend to keep the groups a certain size. Another deterrent to grouping is the differential status of the groups. Students and parents may not cooperate when group change is downward, but they may be supportive of a placement to a higher group. A third deterrent to group mobility is what Hallinan and Sorensen call an instructional burden. Whenever a group change takes place, the teacher needs to help the student make the necessary adjustments to the new group by introducing new material or procedures. This takes time from the teacher's other instructional duties so may not be readily undertaken. The final deterrent to group change is the social interaction of the group. Since students tend to form friendships within instructional groups, a change may disrupt the existing social patterns that students have established. As a result, students may resist changes in the group and may even resist being changed themselves because of their friendships within their current group.

The research so far, therefore, seems to indicate that reading groups are formed within the first few weeks of school in first grade and are relatively fixed after that. One reason these findings are important is because students in different groups receive different educational experiences.

Group Differentiation

Once the students are assigned to reading groups, they are treated in what Rowan and Miracle (1983) call a "batch" technology. Students are moved through the curriculum as a group and the group, rather than the individual student, is the basis for the instructional planning (Borko, et. al., 1981). These groups, then, receive different educational experiences.

Whether or not the group differentiation effect on students contributes to differential achievement has been the object of great controversy and conflicting research reports. In his review of research on grouping practices, Slavin (1988) concludes that groups are effective if the level of materials and the pace of instruction are adapted to student performance. These two important factors in reading instruction can make a difference in the students' achievement.

The philosophy behind ability grouping assumes that students will be placed in materials that are at their level of instruction. Research about good and poor readers seems to indicate, however, that this is not necessarily happening in the classroom. In their study of 86 fifth-grade classrooms, Goldberg and Passow (1962) found that not all teachers take advantage of the narrower range of abilities in their groups to provide material at the students' level of instruction. Other researchers (Allington, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1984; Gambrell, Wilson, & Gantt, 1981) found that not only did teachers tend to ignore the narrower range of abilities, but that poor readers were placed in materials that were too difficult for them. In their study of 35 good and 35 poor readers chosen from 17 fourth-grade classes, for example, Gambrell, et. al. (1981) found that good readers were able to read 99.3% of the words in their texts, but poor readers could read only 89.4% of the words in their materials.

Pace of Instruction

The other factor identified by Slavin (1988) to promote effective groups is the pace of instruction. With pace as well as with materials, poor readers are at a disadvantage. In her exploratory study on

reading group pacing, Barr (1974) found that low groups were paced slower than were high groups. Allington (1983) discovered that even though poor readers spent as much time in reading groups as did good readers, they read fewer words. Biemiller's (1977-1978) research indicates that by the end of first grade, students in the high reading group were reading an average of 81.4 words each day while the students in the low reading group were reading an average of only 31.6 words per day.

The differences in the amount of reading done in reading groups may be attributed in part to the types of instruction in the different reading groups. Gambrell, et. al. (1981) found that low-ability groups spend 17% of their time in decoding skills while high-ability groups spend only 7% of their time with such tasks. Good readers in their study spent 57% of their time in contextual reading while poor readers spent only 33% of their time reading. Allington (1984) also found that good readers spent more time reading silently than did poor readers. In a study of learning disabled students, Leinhart, Zigmond, & Cooley (1981) found that the students spent an average of 14 minutes per day reading silently and 50 minutes per day with indirect reading tasks. That poor readers spend more time with oral reading and with indirect reading tasks may be one reason why some researchers have found that poor readers spend less time attending to the lessons (Eder, 1981; Haskins, Ramey, & Walden, 1983).

Researchers have believed that such group differentiation has had a direct effect on student outcomes (Brophy, 1983). Rowan and Miracle (1983) tested the assumption that differential instruction has an effect on student achievement, but found that it did not have an effect on the 148 students in their study. Group differentiation, however, may have other long-term effects.

The Matthew Effect in Reading

In a review of the effects of group differentiation on reading, Stanovich (1986) posited an interesting theory about the long-term effects of the differentiation. Borrowed from a theory originated by Walberg and Tsai (1983), Stanovich hypothesized that early achievement in reading produces faster rates of subsequent achievement. He called this phenomenon "Matthew effects" after the Gospel according to Matthew: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (XXV:29).

Matthew effect theory suggests that biologically lucky individuals who have superior social and educational environments shape their environment further toward academic success. For example, children who learn to read at a young age select reading activities, make friends of other readers, and reinforce their parents' educational efforts. As the child positively responds to educational influences, parents and schools encourage further achievement. When these students enter school and are placed in high reading groups, they are "chartered" to learn more because they expect to enter high-status educational categories (Gamoran, 1986). These students also read more words each day which sets in motion a "bootstrapping effect."

Good readers, therefore, improve at a faster rate than do poor readers thus increasing the distance between them. Whether or not the difference between good and poor readers is a result of initial differences, instructional differentiation, or a combination of both is still unknown.

Effects of Grouping

Even though researchers have found no conclusive effects of grouping on achievement, the practice of ability grouping remains popular. Perhaps the research has been unconvincing as Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) suggest, or perhaps the effects of grouping reflect the true values of the educational system (Gordon, 1963). In either case, researchers have tried for several decades to determine the effects of ability grouping on achievement.

In their reviews of research on the effects of ability grouping, Esposito (1973) and Wilson and Ribovich (1973) found that grouping caused no consistent positive effect on achievement. The studies prior to the 1970's, however, often used small samples, uncontrolled variables, or lacked a theoretical base (Sorensen, 1970). Later research (Weinstein, 1976; Rowan & Miracle, 1983) found that grouping may have a direct effect on achievement even when controlling for prior achievement.

In studying this possibility, Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) suggested a theory that student ability and effort in conjunction with their educational opportunities will affect achievement. In a study of 384 students in grouped classes and 180 students in ungrouped classes, the researchers found that ability grouping provides fewer opportunities for learning. In ability groups less time is spent on reading than

when students are not grouped. Conversely, the students in groups use their learning opportunity better than students in whole-class instruction, conceivably because of the smaller number of students in each group. They also found that high ability groups provide more opportunities for learning than do low-ability groups, thus increasing the differences in achievement between the groups.

While this finding makes sense, it leaves some residual questions. Since the ability and effort of the students can possibly be influenced by past successes, how important is the role of opportunities for learning (i.e. group membership)? This question has not yet been answered and researchers are still trying to determine what effects ability grouping has on student achievement.

Though the effect of grouping on achievement may be an uncertainty, the effect of grouping on the students' self-concept and attitude is clear. Several research studies have found that students in higher reading groups have a stronger self-concept and a more positive attitude toward reading (Alexander & Filler, 1977; Esposito, 1973; Levenson, 1972; Mann, 1960; Swanson, 1985). The causal relationship between a positive attitude toward reading and group membership is not certain, but Gamoran (1986) believes that students in low-ranking groups may have lower expectations than students in high-ranking groups and, therefore, achieve less. He suggests that these students adopt the attitudes and behavior appropriate to their future roles which are determined by the symbolic educational categories of schooling such as reading groups.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Reading groups seem to have been an experiment in meeting the needs of students of different abilities, but the original caveats about flexible groups seem to have been forgotten. With the popularization of leveled basal readers, where changing groups means skipping or repeating a book, static reading groups have become the norm. Most children are placed in these groups during their primary years, usually in the first few weeks of first grade. Regardless of individual differences in growth, these students often remain in the same group for their elementary years. This early placement can have a major effect on students since the group pace and instruction can influence achievement and attitude. The relationship is complex, and it is not yet understood how the influence occurs, but it seems as if students

placed in low groups in early years stay in those groups and learn at a slower rate than their ability warrants which influences their outlook on their eventual success.

Educators, therefore, need to think about ways to reverse the negative trends caused by ability grouping. One solution, of course, is to abandon grouping altogether. For those educators who prefer to hold to the tradition of grouping yet make some positive changes, the following suggestions should be considered:

1. Develop multiple criteria placement procedures.
2. Reassess group placement throughout the year.
3. Allow group changes during the school year.
4. Try to help poor readers move to at-level groups.
5. Increase the amount of materials poor readers read.
6. Reassess student placement at the end of each school year.
7. Change perceptions about the numbers of students in each group.

From time to time it is good to examine reading practices, to try to understand the evolutions of our traditions, and to question their value. Only through an examination of the research can conclusions be drawn about the validity of reading practices. Through this review of the research of ability grouping, it seems obvious that what has become traditional educational practice should be questioned by researchers and educators alike.

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